***Writing an Observation Paper***

*Here is some background and tips on how to write an observation paper. This format might help you in writing a reaction to a TV show, film, theater production, or concert.*

**Research before you watch:**

1.Develop some background knowledge. Read articles, class material, and descriptions of the dance company, artist, and/or show you will be seeing. This little bit of additional knowledge can go a long way in helping you watch and write about the performance.

2.Arrive early to the performance and read through any program notes and biographies.

3.Keep a writing utensil handy to record notes in the program or in a pad of paper

4.Record keywords and phrases regarding what you see, feel, hear, and experience

5.Do not judge your own perceptions

6.Document details – movements, costumes, music, lighting, scenery, props – with descriptive words (adjectives and verbs) as they occur to you

**What to look for:**

■Look for shapes and patterns in the organization of movement or ideas.

■Are certain things repeated? Do the dancers move in lines or formations?

■Notice relationships between dancers, between objects, between parts of the body

■Is there distance between individuals or groups of dancers? Does the head follow the elbow in a turn or does the dancer focus outward, beyond himself?

■Observe your feelings and images that come to mind, and how they change (or not) throughout the piece

■Does the music make you tense or agitated? Do the movements remind you of popcorn one moment and falling leaves the next?

■How does the performance affect you and/or others in the audience?

**Structuring Your Paper**

1.Look through your notes and recall the thoughts, images, and aspects of the dance that struck you.

■Are there themes or patterns in your responses?

■Were your reactions to certain works stronger than others?

■What stands out as you look at your notes?

2.Based upon this information, determine what you will detail in your central paragraphs. Three or four paragraphs is usually appropriate. You may want to go ahead and draft these paragraphs, covering one or two dance pieces in detail or writing in depth about aspects of the performance (themes or motifs, costumes, lighting, etc.), for example. Each paragraph should have a clear focus and begins with a thought that sets up the supportive sentences that follow.

3.Jot down a few thoughts or keywords that summarize this collection of paragraphs. This is helpful in creating your introductory and concluding paragraphs. Have you focused a lot on the color of things, be it in lighting, costume, or even mood of the pieces, for example? Again consider patterns as you seek to organize your thoughts.

**Writing Your Paper**

***Your Introduction***

Set the Scene – Include the name of the artist or company in your opening lines. Other possibilities include where and when and even under what conditions you are viewing the performance.

Your introduction should also set up the central paragraphs (the meat of your paper) with a thesis statement. A strong introduction will summarize in one or two sentences what is similar or related about the paragraphs ahead while giving the reader a sense of your prevailing reaction to the work. (For more on forming thesis statements see this article at the George Mason University website)

***Your Observations***

Use specific and descriptive language when writing about what you’ve seen.

■Use action words that imply a quality or attribute of the movement (slithered, sauntered, bounded, careened instead of rolled, walked, leaped, or turned)

■Use vivid adjectives to describe qualities of the lighting, costuming, or other elements (cast cheerless shadows, donned gaudy colors and fabrics, carved intricate pathways)

■Generally, you’ll want to write in the present tense. What you see, hear, feel, and sense rather than what you saw, heard, felt, etc. There are cases that past tense might be appropriate but choreography or performance work is best described as something that continues to exist rather than something that has ended or passed. Whatever you choose, be aware and try not to mix tense within the same paragraph or even within the same paper.

Include your interpretation of how the work(s) develop, how they change in mood, how the themes or mood of the piece is expressed.

When offering your opinions of a specific element or how effectively the work is carried out, support these with specific examples from the work (be wary of attempting to support opinion with blanket statements of belief – “The dancer is astonishing. She is an amazing turner and moves better than anyone else on stage.” vs. “The dancer is astonishing. Her turns have a serpentine fluidity, making her a standout every time she takes the stage.”)

***Your Conclusion***

Sum up your overall experiences and thoughts about the performance or restate your thesis in more detail.

Relate what you’ve seen to your study or past experiences.

Reading, Revising, and Polishing Your Work

1.Read what you’ve written aloud to yourself or a friend. Is your meaning clear and does it read smoothly?

2.Leave the paper and then go back to it, reading and making any necessary revisions. Cut or tighten redundant (repetitive) statements, phrases, or paragraphs.

3.Check spelling (particularly on the spelling of names and titles within the production) and proper punctuation

4.Be sure the paper is formatted to your instructor’s specifications before handing it in.